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GRECO-ROMAN PAGANISM AND WOMEN LEADERS: THE FOUNDATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

By

Rowan Estelle Murry

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents, Maura and Tracy Murry, for their unconditional support and encouragement.

ABSTRACT

ROWAN ESTELLE MURRY: Greco-Roman Paganism and Women Leaders: The Foundation of Early Christian Art (Under the direction of Dr. Nancy Wicker)

In this thesis, I explore the impact of Greco-Roman pagan motifs as well as women leaders and officials on the development of Early Christian art by analyzing catacomb paintings, sarcophagi, and minor arts such as finger rings and carved gemstones. I also discuss surviving primary sources written by Tertullian, Eusebius, St. Jerome, and Clement of Alexandria, to gain a better understanding of anti-art views in the first few centuries of the Church's rise to power. These anti-art sentiments were often rooted in attempts to disassociate themselves from pagan practices while Early Christian art was emerging amongst the lower classes who were influenced by ubiquitous pagan artistic traditions and imagery. I also refute the common claim that Christians did not produce artworks prior to 200 CE by examining minor and non-traditional arts and by discussing the social and artistic impact of gender, class, and power dynamics in the Early Christian period. Minor arts and works produced for and by lower and middle classes, women, children, and people of color are almost always overlooked in the study of Late Antiquity. My goal is to shed some light on these perspectives and influences which will provide a more comprehensive, and accurate, perception of the timeline and development of Early Christian art.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will discuss the impact of two overlooked influences on the development of, and public response to, Early Christian art in Rome: female church officials and Greco-Roman artistic traditions. I explore the transitional period between the long-established pagan traditions of Early Antiquity to the new, growing Christian Church in Late Antiquity. My goal is to explain the complex nature of the beginnings of this enduring religious and artistic movement, and highlight the visual culture and marginalized women who were directly responsible for the success of Christianity. Through studying the surviving objects, artworks, and texts, I hope to present a more complete understanding of Early Christian identity, influences, and concerns.

So why is it important to understand and acknowledge the erased voices and predecessors that made Early Christian art possible? Christian art had a profound and enduring effect on the art world; it transformed the way viewers interacted with art. This vital transformation would not have been achievable without early women officials or existing Greco-Roman artistic conventions.

As Jaś Elsner states, the Greco-Roman world was visual.[1] Worshippers learned about their gods through art and myth. Visual representations of the gods were ubiquitous in the Roman world. These images were an essential aspect of Greco-Roman culture, religion, and society. The importance and power of images are evident in how they were used by the state as propaganda. For example, the imperial family and wealthy citizens sponsored artworks to

[1] Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.

bolster their own status. The power of images can also be seen in the concept of *damnatio memoriae*, which physically and metaphorically erases someone from visual culture and memory.

However, the Christian god was not represented in images, but rather through scripture.[2] Christian art served as "visual reminders" of God and salvation, alluding to scripture, virtues, and biblical stories without embodying a particular or clear narrative.[3] Thus, in order to understand and interpret these images, the viewer must have the "code" to decipher them, i.e., be familiar with Christian teachings and texts. As Jensen states, "this kind of economic visual communication required observers to have some level of literacy, probably mainly through hearing sermons or catechetical lectures, so that they could connect the dots, as it were."[4] Art was no longer primarily focused on aesthetics or naturalistic forms. Instead, it functioned rationally in a manner meant to invoke specific Christian values. The primary shift to Early Christian art centered around art's role and function in a society. This new purpose for art continued into the Middle Ages with the rise of the church, which used these guiding principles to develop a Christian visual canon that could be "read" and understood by anyone who was familiar with the Church's teachings. This became especially important as Christianity grew and since many followers were illiterate; the images reflected what they heard in church and reminded them of Christian values and salvation. Today, images still function in this same

[2] Elsner, 12.
[3] Robin M. Jensen, "Compiling Narratives: The Visual Strategies of Early Christian Visual Art" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23 (2015), 15–16.
[4] Jensen, 16.

manner, and it is the viewers' responsibility to "decode" artworks based on their knowledge of the culture, time-period, religion, and motifs referenced in a work.

In Chapter II, I highlight several important primary and secondary sources that will be referenced throughout this thesis. It is important to note that most of the primary texts, which include writings by Tertullian, Eusebius, St. Jerome, and Clement of Alexandria, are male-authored and provide a biased, exclusionary view of the Church. These sources contain valuable information about Church doctrines, practices, theological debates, and customs, but also exclude or admonish many groups including women. The secondary sources featured in Chapter II include the works and scholars which most influenced the direction of this thesis.

The first major contribution to Early Christian art, which I examine in Chapter III, is the influence of Greco-Roman pagan art including mythological scenes, motifs, and artistic conventions that were assimilated into Christian art. Some scholars, including Jensen, argue that Early Christian art should not be studied as its own separate category.[5] Rather, it should be considered a sub-category of Greco-Roman art. By isolating Early Christian art, scholars imply that religious communities in antiquity were exclusive. In reality, most communities co-existed and even influenced each other. A single workshop could produce pieces for Christians, Jews, and polytheists. Early Christians would have been constantly surrounded by pagan imagery, motifs, and styles—it would have been unavoidable. In fact, most Christians did not despise pagan art. They were critical of pagan artworks' content rather than its existence.[6] According to Jensen, Christians adopted the motifs, techniques, and traditions associated with Greco-Roman pagan art, but simply "reassigned" new interpretations and meanings for them.[7]

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[5] Jensen, 2.
[6] Jensen, 4.
[7] Jensen, 2.

Many scholars, following Andre Grabar, argue that Christians did not produce art prior to 200 CE because none survives.[8] However, by 200 CE, Christianity had been adopted by a minority group of primarily working-class individuals who would not have had the funds to produce such expensive objects and likely would have feared persecution. Instead, their art would have taken the form of sermons, prayers, music, and possibly less-permanent materials (including wood carvings, textiles, etc.). Large-scale art production did not begin until Christianity became popular among the elite, predominantly wealthy female widows, who had the money to sponsor and purchase such pieces.

Soon after the acceptance of Christianity by Roman elites, Christianity began to grow rapidly.[9] With the commissioning of new, entirely Christian works, artists looked to the world around them for inspiration: the pagan world. Artists and patrons used contemporary (pagan) tastes, styles, and motifs but with Christian subjects. Christian art was not created out of thin air—it was built upon well-established artistic conventions and traditions that had developed in a pagan society. Everything, including biblical motifs, funerary art practices, and minor arts, was borrowed from traditional pagan art and culture.

Nevertheless, some Christians, including Tertullian, vehemently rejected the production of art.[10] To some, all art objects were idols. Artworks were worshipped by viewers, even if the artists did not intend for their objects to be worshipped. The mere creation and appreciation of an object was worship, and worship of idols was a pagan practice. Many church leaders denounced artists and artworks for this association with paganism and thus, sin and idolatry.[11] Yet, Christian

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[8] Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 7.

[9] Mary Charles-Murray, "The Emergence of Christian Art" in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 56–57.

[10] Tertullian, *De idololatria.*

[11] Moshe Barasch, "Tertullian," in *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (NYU: NYU Press, 1995), 111; Caecilia Davis Weyer, *Sources and Documents: Early Medieval Art 300–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 3; Tertullian, *De idololatria*

art continued to be commissioned and produced, and it eventually developed its own identity and canon. The established conventions of Christian art grew out of a period of transition and change that relied heavily of the traditions established by past and contemporary pagan society.

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of Early Christian art is women's contributions. Chapter IV of this thesis explores how women served as church leaders, patrons, and subjects of art through an examination of surviving literature, artworks, catacombs, and archaeological excavations. The existence of the church and Christian art as it is today would not be possible without the women who founded, funded, and bolstered the church at its beginnings. Christine Schenk summarizes the role of women by stating that "it is one of the ironies of history that despite their early prominence in proclaiming the Christian message, the ecclesial leadership of Christian women in the fifth century was significantly more circumscribed than in the first."[12] The same can be said of women throughout history, perhaps even up until the present, which further emphasizes the prominence and power these early Christian women held in their communities.

Finding abundant evidence for women in the art and archaeological record, and even in primary sources, was surprisingly easy.[13] However, perhaps unsurprisingly, there was very little scholarship on this subject especially when compared to the vast amount of literature on Greco-Roman and Early Christian art. My goal for this chapter in particular is to draw attention to this disparity and point out the plethora of evidence to support claims that women held an extremely significant role in the early church. These women's achievements and lives have been erased and

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[12] Christine Schenk, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 1.

[13] It is important to note that most primary literary sources and texts are male-authored and usually represent women in a negative light or diminish, or ignore all together, their contributions.

forgotten, intentionally I might add, and it is my responsibility as an aspiring scholar to call attention to their stories and contribute to uncovering a more accurate and inclusive history.

The purpose of this thesis is to contextualize this historical moment of rapid change by analyzing surviving artworks, monuments, and primary sources to develop a more complete understanding of the rise of the Christianity. Paganism did not disappear with the popularization of the Church. In a way, it was absorbed and became an essential part of Christianity as a whole; pagan art was the standard for Christian artisans, and pagan culture was the norm for early Christians. Christianity and its long history of art production would not exist without the influence of its pagan predecessors. In the next chapter of this thesis, I discuss the primary and secondary sources that I have frequently consulted. This literature review will provide an overview of current and past scholarship, as well as describe how these authors' writings have influenced and directed my research for this project.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

This chapter presents a brief overview of work by a few well-established scholars that have been influential in the field of Early Christian art and will be referred to frequently throughout this thesis. Their ideas have shaped the way Early Christian art is studied and discussed. In addition to these secondary texts, this paper will also refer to a number of primary sources including Eusebius, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Tertullian, as well as excerpts from texts including *The Book of Popes*.

Primary Sources and Authors

Tertullian (160-220 CE)

Tertullian was a prolific third-century author and church leader in Carthage. His ideas serve as a foundation for later church doctrines. His most famous, or infamous, theological position advocates for the rejection of images and idols. One of Tertullian's most influential texts is *On Idolatry* (*De idololatria*), which outlines his reasons for taking such a strong stance against arts. His works provide a glimpse into one of many perspectives on the production of art during the beginnings and rise of the Christian church.

Tertullian clearly states his hatred and distrust for the arts in the opening lines of *On Idolatry*: "The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry…the idolater is likewise a murderer."[14] It is

[14] Tertullian, *De idololatria.*

necessary to note that Tertullian never clearly defines idols or idolatry. He never identifies acceptable images or arts—it is often assumed that his rejection of images includes all types of images and art products.[15]

Throughout the treatise, Tertullian addresses the dangers of a variety of arts, with a particular disdain for the theater, astrology, and artists—whom he likens to the devil incarnate.[16] He views art as a "social danger" and criticizes idolatry's connections to paganism.[17] Tertullian recognizes art's ability to invoke an emotional response and arouse passions in its viewers: "by its very nature it is capable of being used in idolatrous worship, and, given the fallacies of human nature, it will eventually promote actual idolatry."[18] Tertullian argues that all artworks, regardless of the creator's intent, become "objects of adoration" and thus, become idols.[19]

Tertullian's *The Argument from Scripture* echoes these same sentiments towards image-making. In this brief text, he passionately attacks artists who claim to be Christian. He argues that no artist can be a Christian because the making of an idol is essentially the same as worshipping an idol—to bring an object into existence permits the eventual worship of it.[20] Caecilia Davis-Weyer adds that Tertullian's tone, in both this text and *De idololatria*, has a "bitter tone" that he suggests was attacking common, widely accepted habits and attitudes of the church towards art and artists.[21]

[15] Moshe Barasch, "Tertullian," in *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (NYU: NYU Press, 1995), 111.
[16] Tertullian, *De idololatria*.
[17] Barasch, 113–118.
[18] Barasch, 114.
[19] Barasch, 114.
[20] Tertullian, *The Argument from Scripture*.
[21] Caecilia Davis Weyer, *Sources and Documents: Early Medieval Art 300–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 3.

Eusebius, Bishop of Cesarea (260-340 CE)

Eusebius was a prolific scholar and theologian who served as Bishop of Cesarea in the early fourth century. He was one of the most influential church figures of his time and had a close relationship with Emperor Constantine. Eusebius wrote on a variety of subjects concerning the history and development of the church. Arguably Eusebius's most famous work is *The History of the Church*, the only text of its kind written within the first 300 years of the church's establishment.[22] As many scholars point out, Eusebius did not pay much attention to the arts, but he hints at both his rejection and support of images.[23] In a letter to Constantia Augusta, Constantine's sister, he passionately denounces images of Christ, while in the *Life of Constantine*, he applauds efforts to display Christian art in public. His contrasting attitudes towards religious images perhaps reflects the complex nature of the topic, as well as the transition between established Greco-Roman traditions and new Christian values.

Fragments of a letter (whose precise date is unknown) from Eusebius to Constantia Augusta survive through eighth-century copies.[24] According to Eusebius's letter, Constantia asked him to send an image of Christ. He outright refuses and plainly states his contempt for such images that depict Christ in his divine form. He argues it is impossible to accurately depict the glory and immortality of God in art: "who, then, would be able to represent by means of dead colors and inanimate delineations the glistening, flashing radiance of such dignity and glory, when even His superhuman disciples could not bear to behold Him in this guise…admitting they could not withstand the sight?"[25] Eusebius clearly and plainly states that a "true representation of

[22] Eusebius, *History of the Church*, translated by G.A. Williamson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).
[23] Barasch, "Eusebius," in *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (NYU: NYU Press, 1992), 141.
[24] Barasch, 143.
[25] Barasch, 144–145.

God is altogether impossible."[26] While he aggressively condemns images of divine Christ, he does not write about images of Christ in human form or of biblical events and symbols. It can be assumed, by analyzing Eusebius's other texts, that his aversion to images is only applicable to those that attempt to depict true representations of God or Christ after ascension.

One such text in which Eusebius speaks in favor of images is *Life of Constantine*, which is comprised of four books and remained unfinished due to Eusebius's death around 340 CE. These books are a biographical account of Emperor Constantine and his role is establishing Christianity in the Roman Empire. Most interestingly, Eusebius here praises religious imagery and Constantine for "impressing a Christian character" in cities throughout the empire.[27] In direct contrast to his letter to Constantia, Eusebius applauds efforts to erect religious public monuments.

Moshe Barasch suggests that Eusebius in his letter and in *Life of Constantine* discusses two distinct image-types. The first includes artworks that are narrative or symbolic—they either tell a story or signify something—and are acceptable because they represent or allude to past events.[28] For example, an ornate jewel-encrusted crucifix would be acceptable to Eusebius because it is obviously not the True Cross, or attempting to look like the True Cross. The second type of artwork is that which claims to have the same form as the entity that it represents. In his letter to Constantia, he denounces the suggested artwork that depicts a portrait of Christ. According to Eusebius, this painting is unacceptable because it attempts the impossible task of accurately representing divinity's true form.[29]

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[26] Barasch, 145.
[27] Barasch, 148.
[28] Barasch, 150.
[29] Barasch, 150.

St. Jerome (345-420 AD)

St. Jerome was a Christian priest and theologian who spent much of his early years traveling and living in solitude before returning to Rome to serve as secretary for Pope Damasus I. Jerome wrote several treatises and translations, but he is most known for his letters, many of which survive today. Jerome's letters are valuable because they describe his personal experience and perspective on historical events, for example, the "sack" of Rome. He also provides insight into his innermost opinions and thoughts on the Church and its practices, which he never spoke of publicly.

The letter most pertinent to this thesis is his letter to his recently ordained nephew Nepotian on the duties of clergymen, written in 394 CE.[30] The letter outlines the good (and un-Christian) behaviors of monks and clergymen. Here, Jerome denounces the Church's ostentatious display of wealth in its churches, buildings, and objects: "Many people build churches now with party walls and pillars to support them: slabs of marble shine brightly in them, the ceilings are gay with gold, the altar is adorned with jewels, and no care is shown in choosing Christ's ministers."[31] St. Jerome warns Nepotian to avoid such sinful luxuries and instead find peace in poverty and learning. This letter provides a rare glimpse into St. Jerome's innermost conflict between his dedication to God and his service to the Church, an institution that he saw as becoming increasingly un-Christian. His thoughts on the Church are echoed by St. Augustine who spoke publicly on the dangers of art and luxury.

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[30] Davis-Weyer, 38.
[31] St. Jerome, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, edited and translated by F.A. Wright (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., 1933), 215.

Secondary Sources

André Grabar

Arguably, one of the most referenced secondary works in Early Christian scholarship is André Grabar's 1968 *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*. Grabar's writings serve as foundational literature for the study of Early Christian art and material culture. In this book, he established the 200 CE date that is commonly cited as the beginning of Christian art production.[32] However, recently a few scholars have questioned Grabar's initial date. In this paper, his evidence will be examined in depth to disprove several myths about the early production, development, and contexts of Christian artworks. Throughout his work, Grabar discusses a broad range of topics and artifacts, including borrowed pagan motifs, social contexts, and contemporary influences by pagan, Jewish, and imperial artistic traditions.

Grabar opens the first chapter with the statement: "the earliest Christian images appeared somewhere about the year 200;[…] during roughly a century and a half the Christians did without any figurative representations of a religious character."[33] He further argues this absence of art production is the direct result of Christianity's rejection of images prior to 200 CE. However, I maintain that this gap is the result of other factors, such as fear of persecution, lack of funding and support by wealthy classes, and the reliance on non-traditional forms of art (which Grabar does not recognize as art) such as music and sermons. Grabar also acknowledges that his 200 CE date is based on the dating of the catacombs of Rome, despite knowing "that this chronology is rather insecure.[34]

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[32] Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 7.
[33] Grabar, 7.
[34] Grabar, 7.

Grabar discusses at length the early Christians' borrowing of pagan motifs and scenes as an unintentional incorporation of the single "visual language"—the common iconography and motifs used and understood by most artists and viewers in Rome during the third and fourth centuries. Throughout the book, he draws comparisons with pagan funerary art, imperial portraiture, and common symbols and figures including the orant. Grabar plainly states that the formation of Christian funerary cycles is directly influenced by pagan ones.[35] He argues that the borrowing of pagan motifs was not deliberate.[36] As Christians adopted pagan burial and funerary practices, they replaced some mythological imagery with comparable Christian stories and themes. Early Christian art incorporated the iconography of Greco-Roman culture, rather than intentionally reassigning meaning to such images to "erase" paganism.

While Grabar's book is now essential in the field of Early Christian art, it is necessary to acknowledge the inaccuracies and biases that have unfortunately influenced later study and scholarship. Aside from his claim that Christians did not produce artworks prior to 200 CE, he also asserted that several forms of art, particularly illuminated manuscripts, should be ignored: "It is certain that a good number of Paleo-Christian and medieval images ought to be excluded;…the simple fact that the images were painted or sculptured is not enough to make them works of art."[37] I argue that the omission of certain forms of art is an antiquated, privileged argument that excludes the art and perspectives of non-elites, lower classes, women, people of color, and other cultures. To fully understand a culture, it is necessary to acknowledge and investigate all forms of art and material culture.

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[35] Grabar, 14.
[36] Grabar, 37.
[37] Grabar, xlv.

Grabar also argues that the absence of evidence for large-scale monuments indicates no art production. He asserts that "there have remained to us from the same period an appreciable number of profane images" from non-Christian contexts.[38] Yet, he does not acknowledge that the "appreciable number of profane images" survive from the dominant, long-established cultural/religious group: the pagan Romans. At this point, Christianity was still a small religion with no funding or support to sponsor expensive monuments and artworks. Instead, they created other, more accessible, forms of art (which Grabar intentionally excludes) including music, sermons, and manuscripts. Absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence.

Grabar's arguments are an essential aspect of understanding Early Christian art production as well as the scholarship written since 1968. Throughout this paper, I will refer to Grabar's evidence and examples, while I also attempt to discredit several problematic claims that have inaccurately rewritten the history and development of Early Christian art production.

J. Stevenson

Some of the earliest surviving examples of Early Christian art come from catacombs and other funerary contexts. A key text on this subject is J. Stevenson's *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity* from 1978. This book provides a brief and concise overview of the history, function, and decoration of the Early Christian catacombs in Rome. Stevenson's work is an essential for understanding the history and contents of Christian catacombs as well as how they contributed to the development of the Christian iconographical canon.

The catacombs were modeled on *hypogaeum*, subterranean tomb chambers that were prevalent in antiquity.[39] Many times, they were constructed from the remains of an abandoned

[38] Grabar, 38.
[39] J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 12.

tufa quarry.[40] The catacombs began as cheap burial places for poor Christians who could not afford a traditional above-ground burial or tomb. As Christianity rose in popularity among middle- and upper-class Romans, their catacomb tombs became larger and more elaborately decorated. However, most burials took the form of *loculi*, which were hollowed-out "shelves" lining the walls, and sometimes floors (*formae*), of the catacombs. The body would be wrapped in linen, placed inside the hollow, and then the *loculi* were sealed up with tiles, stone, or marble.[41] Most catacomb paintings are found in the most expensive, large tombs called *cubicula* (tomb chambers for an entire family) and *arcosolia* (more elaborate tombs).[42]

The catacomb tombs were dug and maintained by *fossores* (*fossarii*), which translates to "diggers."[43] Interestingly, these early grave diggers were responsible for decorating and painting the tombs. They are mentioned often in surviving documents as well as inscriptions, grave markers, and graffiti within catacombs. Although after 430 CE there is no mention of *fossores*. Tombs were gradually moved above ground to churches and cemeteries, which were presided over by *prepositi* or *mansionarii*.[44]

Stevenson also points out that Christians never used the catacombs for worship or as hiding places. Catacombs were located far outside city walls (a traditional Roman practice), meaning Christians would have to walk a great distance regularly for worship. Catacombs also did not have the space to hold many worshippers aside from the handful of *fossores*. However, Christians did visit the catacombs, primarily to worship the tombs of martyrs and visit deceased relatives.

The chapters most relevant to this thesis are chapters four and seven which contain several examples of borrowed pagan elements in catacomb wall paintings. Stevenson draws comparisons between Christian catacomb designs and artworks with those of Etruscan

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[40] Stevenson, 13.
[41] Stevenson, 18.
[42] Stevenson, 18.
[43] Stevenson, 10.
[44] Stevenson, 23.

necropoli. He also discusses frequent catacomb elements and motifs that have distinctly pagan origins, including the myth of Ulysses, representations of Roman gods, the orant figure, and more.

John Lowden

John Lowden is a renowned scholar who specializes in later Byzantine art. Most of his research and recent publications focus on medieval carved ivories and illuminated manuscripts. His 1997 book *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* is a modernized version of John Beckwith's text of the same name. Lowden provides a general but precise overview of the history, works, and monuments from early Christianity to the sack of Constantinople in the thirteenth century. The first chapter is most relevant to the contents of this thesis and presents a wide range of media including manuscripts and portable objects, unlike Grabar's book which explicitly excludes such forms for being non-traditional, i.e. not painting or sculpture. Lowden, unlike his predecessors, assumes a more open-minded approach and acknowledges other potential arguments and questions, as well as a wider variety of media and objects from the eastern empire, such as Dura Europos.

Lowden suggests Early Christian art was spread through portable objects and private, domestic art. No large-scale Christian buildings survive from the pre-Constantinian era, although Lowden argues that such buildings did exist especially in Rome, which had such a large population. These buildings do not survive because they were destroyed or rebuilt later. Christians also worshipped in "house-churches," which were private rooms in wealthy homes owned by Christians. The rooms of these houses were decorated with paintings of biblical images and figures. Some of the best surviving examples of house-churches come from Dura-Europos which I will examine in Chapter IV.

Lowden also suggests that portable objects and idols played a key role in circulating Christian artworks and motifs in the early period. One such example is the illuminated manuscript. Lowden discusses in detail the oldest surviving biblical manuscript, the *Quedlinburg Itala*, which was likely made in Rome in the early part of the fifth century. He argues that this manuscript was created at a time when there was no established canon or procedure for illuminated manuscript production. This implies that "artists were able to create complex images by combining simple visual formulae…It was the context in which these formulae were used that could give them a specifically Christian flavor."[45] His statement suggests that early artists worked within established Greco-Roman artistic traditions to create uniquely Christian works, which were then circulated throughout the empire, helping to establish a distinct Christian identity.

Jaś Elsner

Another leading scholar is Jaś Elsner, whose 1998 book, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, presents a unique perspective of this Early Christian time period. Elsner is primarily a Roman art historian—a contrast to the many medievalist scholars mentioned in this chapter. Elsner retells this Early Christian time period (second century through fifth century CE) with a focus on the art and culture of the pagan Roman world. He argues that post-Constantinian Rome was viewed as a continuation of its pagan ancestor, and thus historians should study the time period using the same perspective. Much of the book is dedicated to the discussion of the visual culture and power of art in the Roman Empire pre-Constantine.

In Part II of the book, Elsner compares Romanization and Christianization by arguing that they both "shared the principal concern of transforming identity (individual and collective)

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[45] John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997), 59–60.

by fusing traditional and local concerns with a centripetal sense of belonging to a large whole."[46] The pagan Romans accomplished this through syncretism, assimilating outside gods and deities with the gods and myths of the Roman pantheon.

Art was a key aspect of Romanization, allowing Romans to establish themselves in territories by building monuments, temples, and commissioning public buildings and artworks. Likewise, the Christians established their dominance through the construction of churches. In some instances, pagan temples and spaces were even converted into Christian churches and baptisteries. The most famous example of this practice is the Pantheon, which was converted in 608–610.[47] However, unlike Romanization, Christian architecture was primarily commissioned by Church leaders, rather than the imperial family. In Rome, many of the churches, including Santa Maria Maggiore, within the city limits were built by popes to establish themselves in center of the pagan Roman world.[48] Elsner suggests that Christian architecture borrowed the same practices as Romanization in order to "propagate a collective sense of identity through the visual," which for both the Romans and Christians was extremely effective.[49]

Elsner also argues that as churches replaced temples, likewise relics replaced cult statues. In the fourth and fifth centuries the cult of relics developed where churches, like pagan temples before them, housed the bones and objects of Christian saints and martyrs. These relics were venerated and believed to have the power to grant sanctity and sometimes perform miracles. This cult of relics become much more powerful as Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe. During medieval times, pilgrims traveled across Europe visiting various churches and worshipping their relics. This also opened the door for portable icons, which were small religious

[46] Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 138.
[47] Feyo L. Schuddeboom, "The Conversion of Temples in Rome," *Journal of Late Antiquity* (vol. 10, 2017), 175.
[48] Elsner, 225.
[49] Elsner, 141.

artworks and objects, that allowed personal devotion.[50] These personal icons are paralleled by Roman lararia, or house-shrines, which contained small portable versions of Roman deities for daily worship within the house.

Robin M. Jensen

A more recent scholar, Robin Margaret Jensen, has written both on studying Early Christian artworks and on the scholarship within the field. As one of the few female scholars, her work is invaluable because it includes new perspectives and ideas that refute long-established theories, such as Andre Grabar's, by examining a variety of visual and textual evidence. Jensen is currently working on a new project entitled "From Idols to Icons," which will explore early controversies over divine images and the production of art in the fourth and fifth centuries.[51]

Her 2000 book *Understanding Early Christian Art* combines textual evidence and visual culture to explore the development of and influences on Christian art production. Her work primarily focuses on the pagan aspects that were borrowed and adapted for Christian use. Jensen divides Early Christian art into three distinct categories: scriptural themes, decorative motifs, and biblical subjects.

The earliest of these categories is art related to scriptural themes, which include images of the Good Shepherd, the orant, harvest motifs or meals, fisherman, and the philosopher.[52] These image-types most often have direct parallels in Greco-Roman motifs, so much so that they are sometimes indistinguishable from pagan compositions. Jensen argues that for the first few centuries Christian art was "not essentially different" from its contemporaries; "whatever art works Christians created or owned were indistinguishable from those created or owned by their

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[50] Elsner, 233.
[51] "Robin Jensen," University of Notre Dame, n.d., https://theology.nd.edu/people/robin-jensen/.
[52] Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 17.

Roman or Jewish neighbors."[53] Thus, these scriptural images, which were often taken from pagan iconography and applied to Christian themes, are among the earliest image-types.

The second category is decorative works, which can sometimes also be symbolic. These images include the small motifs of doves, peacocks, vines and grapes, fish, boats, lambs, and olive and palm trees.[54] Most of these images also have pagan roots: peacocks were associated with the goddess Juno, vines and grapes with Bacchus and agriculture, olive trees were symbolic of Minerva, and so on. Context is key for these image-types. They can often only be identified as Christian by their "compositional proximity to biblical subjects;" otherwise they are indistinguishable from their pagan counterparts.[55]

The third category is the most overtly Christian: biblical subjects and personalities. These image-types include portraits of biblical figures as well as events from both the Old and New Testaments. Popular narratives include portrayals of Jesus's miracles, Noah's ark, Abraham and Isaac, Jonah and the whale, Daniel with the lions, and Moses striking the rock.[56]

In *Understanding Early Christian Art*, Jensen also discusses the history and problems of interpretation. She suggests that early scholars used material evidence to supplement and confirm "later theological and liturgical developments."[57] This resulted in artifacts being dated incorrectly and "deemed to be supplementary and supportive, rather than autonomous and sometimes divergent."[58] This method also ignores the possibility of outside influence on the development of the early church. Studying visual culture as a supplement to textual culture

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[53] Jensen, 16.
[54] Jensen, 16–17.
[55] Jensen, 17.
[56] Jensen, 19.
[57] Jensen, 27.
[58] Jensen, 28.

makes it easier for scholars to ignore minority influence and developments among lower classes, as much of the surviving material was commissioned and owned by wealthy, white men.

One of Jensen's more recent, and intriguing, is an article that explores how to study, think about, and discuss early Christian art. "Compiling Narratives: The Visual Strategies of Early Christian Visual Art" was published in 2015 and is one of the few contemporary texts to refute past misconceptions, including Grabar's established 200 CE date.[59] Her most compelling arguments discuss the way Christian art should be studied as well as how it transformed the role of art in Western society. Jensen argues that early Christian art should not be studied separately from Greco-Roman and Jewish art because to do so would require ignoring relationships and contextual information crucial to the understanding of the early Christians and their art. The highlight of Jensen's article is her claim that Christian art revolutionized the way viewers interact with material culture. Art no longer focused on aesthetics and naturalism. Instead, it functioned rationally like a secret code—meant to invoke specific ideas and values that could only be understood by being familiar with the sermons, prayers, motifs, practices, and biblical stories. Jensen's works have had the most influence on the research and development of my work. Robin Jensen's scholarship has helped to acknowledge past misconceptions while also exploring how to move forward with further research. Her work is an essential aspect of the arguments and evidence presented within this thesis.

Christine Schenk

Another scholar who has had an immense impact on my research is Christine Schenk. Schenk is a theologian whose research focuses on women and gender studies in early Christianity. Her book *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* is

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[59] Jensen, "Compiling Narratives: The Visual Strategies of Early Christian Visual Art," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23 (2015), 1.

one of the few publications to closely examine the literary and archaeological evidence for women in the early Church. Most of the evidence supporting women in positions of authority and power come from funerary art, including catacombs frescoes, sarcophagi, and tombs. Schenk also incorporates primary sources and biblical texts, including the letters of Paul, The Acts of the Apostles, and Tertullian's prescriptions.

Schenk's extensive research inspired me to direct my thesis to explore similar issues relating to women's representation in the early Church. In Chapter IV, I examine the evidence in surviving art, texts, and excavations to support Schenk's theory that women served as church leaders and were largely responsible for the spread of Christianity. This topic is especially important to study because women, since the rise of Christianity, have been excluded from the Church and continue to be erased from its history, even today.

In the following chapters, I will discuss the immense impact that both pagan iconography and women had on the development of Early Christian art, and the success of the Church in Late Antiquity. Without their contributions and influence, the Church would not have been able to spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire or gain the power and wealth necessary to establish itself as the supreme authority in the Western world. Chapter III will explore how early Christians adopted pagan iconography and Greco-Roman artistic conventions to appeal to the masses while promoting Christian values and messages.

CHAPTER III:
PAGAN INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

Soon after the acceptance of Christianity by Roman elites, Christianity began to grow rapidly. With the commissioning of new, entirely Christian works, artists looked to the world around them for inspiration: the pagan world. Artists and patrons used contemporary (pagan) tastes, styles, and motifs but with Christian subjects. Christian art was not created out of thin air—it was built upon well-established artistic conventions and traditions developed in a pagan society. Everything, including biblical motifs, funerary art practices, and minor arts, was borrowed from traditional pagan art and culture. Paganism did not disappear with the Christians. In a way, it was absorbed and became an essential part of Christianity as a whole; pagan art was the standard for Christian artisans, and pagan culture was the norm for early Christians. Christianity and its long history of art production would not exist without its pagan predecessors and influence. In this chapter, I will discuss the various borrowed symbols and motifs that have direct pagan predecessors and significance, as well as how they were adapted to fit Christian ideologies, virtues, and stories. I will also examine the reuse and recontextualization of pagan spaces and architecture, primarily temples and religious structures, for Christian function. The spaces discussed will include various pagan temples in Rome that were converted into churches, the Pantheon, and the Basilica of St. Peters.

Symbols

The first category of images is symbolic, non-narrative motifs. These images are often more decorative in function and derive from pagan prototypes.[60] They are some of the earliest motifs found in Christian funerary contexts and are often ambiguous because of their pagan roots.[61] There are two types of symbols: objects and animal motifs, and human figures that function symbolically.

Object and Animal Motifs

Early Christians borrowed pre-existing symbols and decorative motifs and applied them to biblical scriptures, prayers, and themes. The object-type symbols include doves, peacocks, vines and/or grapes, fish, boats, lambs, trees, palm leaves, and harvest or banquet motifs.

The dove, in Christian contexts, often represents the soul or the Holy Spirit. It was even connected to the death of the martyr Polycarp in 155 CE.[62] A first-hand account states that as Polycarp was stabbed to death, a dove emerged and flew into the Heavens.[63] For the pagans, doves were a symbols of Venus, the goddess of love and desire. Doves fill the upper register of the *Brescia Lipsanotheca*, a fourth century reliquary depicting scenes from the life of Christ.[64] They are also commonly found in the catacombs: two painted doves flank an orants figure in the tomb of Felicissima in the Praetextatus Catacomb as means of saying “Mayest thou live in the Holy Spirit.”[65]

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[60] Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 17.
[61] Mary Charles-Murray, “The Emergence of Christian Art” in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 51–52.
[62] Robert Milburn. *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 32.
[63] Milburn, 32.
[64] Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 333.
[65] Milburn, 37.

Peacocks were also popular bird motifs, in both Christian and pagan contexts. They were associated with resurrection because their flesh was thought to be indestructible and sacred.[66] For pagans, the peacock also was affiliated with the goddess Juno whose servant was Argos, a one-hundred eyed guard, who was represented by the peacock which also has many “eyes”.

Grapevines were also extremely common, and for both pagans and Christians they served as symbols of fertility, agriculture, and abundance.[67] They sometimes appear with images of Adam and Eve, but primarily take on a decorative quality in tombs and funerary art. The vine has also been interpreted as a symbol for the Eucharist, Christ (the vine) and the apostles (the branches), and the Church.[68] Hippolytus describes this metaphor:

> The spiritual vine was the Saviour. The shoots and the vine branches are his saints, those who believe in him. The bunches of grapes are his martyrs; the trees which are joined with the vine show forth the Passion; the vintagers are the angels; the baskets full of grapes are the Apostles; the winepress is the Church; and the wine is the power of the Holy Spirit.[69]

The front side of the *Sarcophagus of the Good Shepherd* (Fig. 1) at the Vatican depicts a detailed grape harvesting scene, an allusion to the abundance of eternal life and a reference to Christ who is also represented by the shepherd.[70] Grapevines appear everywhere in pagan art, from houses to tombs, and in addition to fertility and abundance, they are connected with Bacchus, god of agriculture, who often is used to allude to leisure, banquets, and luxury. A famous depiction of grapes as a reference to Bacchus and agriculture is found at the House of the Centaur at Pompeii.[71] Now in the National Archeological Museum of Naples, the fresco portrays Bacchus

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[66] Jensen, 159.
[67] Jensen, 60.
[68] Jensen, 61.
[69] Hippolytus de bene in Jensen 61.
[70] 2nd 1/2 4th C. A.D. Sarcophagus of the Good Shepherd front. Place: Museo Pio-Cristiano (Vatican City). https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000303485.
[71] 1st century CE. House of the Centaur; Bacchus on Mount Vesuvius. wall painting. Place: Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/LESSING_ART_10311441159.

dressed in grapes and vines at the foot of Mount Vesuvius, alluding to the fertility of the land as a result of the volcanic soil.

The fish is most commonly thought to be a symbol for Christ. Throughout the New Testament, the fish is used to allude to the body of Christ, as for example in the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes. Participants in the Eucharist, receive the "fish," or the body of Christ.[72] In the Crypt of Lucina at the Catacombs of Callixtus, is a particularly well-preserved example of a fresco depicting a basket of bread and a fish, a reference to the first miracle of Christ and the Eucharist.[73] One of the most intriguing ancient motifs is the Greek word for fish, which can also be interpreted as an acrostic that spells out "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour."[74] An example can be found on a late third-century nicolo (banded agate) carved gemstone, which once was part of a ring.[75] The Greek letters ΙΧΘΥC (*ichthys* meaning fish) are engraved in the center flanked by two fish, one above and one below the word. In pagan contexts, fish iconography was just as common, serving as a symbol of abundance or a reference to one of the gods, especially Neptune or Bacchus. Fish were also a very common theme in graffiti.[76] The Romans drew what was around them, and coastal towns including Pompeii often took inspiration from the sea.

Other common motifs include boats, lambs, palm leaves, and banquets, among others. For Christians, boats referenced biblical narratives including Noah's ark and the deluge. However, for pagans, boats were a common graffito and could also signify a connection to the sea, abundance and wealth, or the gods (i.e. Neptune). Like the fish graffiti, boats were popular

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[72] Milburn, 30.
[73] J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 90.
[74] Milburn, 30.
[75] Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), fig. 26B.
[76] The Ancient Graffiti Project, http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/results?global=fish&sort_by=relevance.

motifs especially in seaside towns including Pompeii and Herculaneum.[77] Lambs stood as symbols for Christ and the innocent soul.[78] Lambs also appear in pastoral scenes, which were popular in classical Greco-Roman art. Palm leaves are referenced in the Bible and allude to "Palm Sunday." On the other hand, for pagans, the palm leaf was used either as a decorative element or as a symbol for victory.[79] Finally, the banquet, like the grapevines and fish, refers to abundance. In Christian contexts, banquet motifs can also be interpreted as a reference to the afterlife and eternal bliss. The tradition of banquet scenes, however, is not Christian. In fact, banquet scenes in funerary contexts were first introduced by the Etruscans. *The Tomb of the Leopards* at the Monterozzi necropolis is one of the best-preserved examples.[80] Couples dine while reclining on couches surrounded by musicians and servants. Etruscan tombs are eerily similar to the cubicula within the catacombs—both types are large rooms, usually reserved for a family, with fresco paintings and decorative motifs.

Another important symbol that was later adopted by Constantine is the chi-rho, the monogram of Christ. The monogram consists of the overlapping Greek letters *chi* and *rho*, the beginning of the name *Christos* (Christ).[81] The chi-rho is found in all media: wall paintings, sculpture, coins, jewelry, and carved gemstones, etc. Constantine adopted the symbol as part of his imperial insignia after allegedly having a vision of the monogram which allowed him to defeat Maxentius in 312. On the obverse side of the bronze coin of Constantine the Great, the

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[77] The Ancient Graffiti Project, http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/results?global=boat&sort_by=relevance. Several of these boat graffiti are actually signatures. They include the name of the artist (presumably) written in a stylized manner to emulate the shape of a boat. These signatures were quite common—many can be found in public spaces, notably the Theater Corridor at Pompeii.
[78] Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 11.
[79] F. B. Tarbell, "The Palm of Victory," *Classical Philology* 3, no. 3 (Jul. 1908): 264.
[80] Built circa 470 BC. The Monterozzi Necropolis, Tomba Dei Leopardi / Tomb of the Leopards. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/ASITESPHOTOIG_10313827052.
[81] Spier, 198.

chi-rho can be seen above a Roman military standard, a reference to Constantine's victory with the aid of the Christian God.[82]

Figural Motifs

The figural-type symbols include the orant, the Good Shepherd, fishermen, and a philosopher. These are among some of the earliest images found in Christian catacombs. They were taken directly from pagan iconography, making them incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate from Greco-Roman pagan art. It is only when these motifs are in close proximity to clearly Christian images, such as biblical narratives, that they can be characterized as having Christian meaning.[83]

One of the more frequent motifs in funerary art is that of the orant (*orans* in Latin), a frontal figure gazing upwards towards the heavens with its hands lifted in a gesture of prayer. These figures of *pietas* were ubiquitous and not unique to Christian art. The praying person motif was common among other religions and cultures prior and contemporaneous to the early Christians.[84] For example, several orant statuettes survive from Ancient Mesopotamia, including an Assyrian standing orant from Carchemish c. 1000 BCE.[85] Another example, which is clearly a female prayer figure, survives from the Minoans: a goddess from Gazi Sanctuary dating to c. 1400-1300 BCE.[86] Some interpretations, especially in funerary contexts, view the orant as a representation of the deceased's soul. This is further supported by the fact that orant figures were usually women and the Romans referred to the soul as being feminine.[87] However, it seems more

[82] Spier, 198.
[83] Jensen, 17.
[84] Stevenson, 33.
[85] c. 1000 BCE. Standing Orant (Praying Figure). figurine. Place: British Museum, London, United Kingdom. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/LESSING_ART_10311441525.
[86] 1400-1300 B.C. Female Figurine: Minoan Goddess from Gazi Sanctuary. Place: Archaiologikon Mouseion Herakleiou. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000155091.
[87] Jensen, 35.

likely that the orant was simply an allusion to Christian piety and the church (the Latin word for church, *ecclesia*, is feminine).[88] Or perhaps the female figure is the personification of *pietas*. In the cubiculum of the Velatio at the Catacomb of Priscilla is perhaps the most well-known early orant figure.[89] The fresco dates to about the third century and depicts a clearly feminine figure, as evidenced by her dress and veil, with her hands raised in prayer. In some scenes, the orant appears to be in a paradise-like setting, suggesting that the individual has arrived in Heaven.[90]

While the orant motif is ambiguous, the significance of image of the Good Shepherd, however, is much clearer. Most of these image-types represent Christ as a shepherd carrying a lamb over his shoulders. Jesus was described as the Good Shepherd, with the lambs or sheep being the souls of innocent, good Christians. The implied message is salvation is only possible through Christ.[91] One of the earliest Good Shepherd paintings can be found at the center of a ceiling fresco in the Catacomb of SS. Pietro and Marcellino, dating to the third century.[92] The Good Shepherd is often found in catacomb frescoes and other funerary art due to its affiliation with the afterlife and eternal paradise. However, the shepherd, like the orant, was a universal motif. The pagan prototype of this image was Mercury who was a *psychopomp*, a guide for souls into the afterlife.[93] In Christianity, Jesus assumed the role of the psychopomp, leading the saved to paradise.

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[88] Jensen, 35.

[89] 3rd C. A.D. Rome: Catacomb of Priscilla Cubiculum of the Velatio wall painting: det.: veiled orant. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000580207.

[90] Jensen, 36.

[91] John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997), 21.

[92] 3rd C. A.D. Catacomb of SS. Pietro and Marcellino: the Good Shepherd. ceiling fresco. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000580470.

[93] Janet Huskinson, “Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 42 (1974): 83.

The fishermen motif could be a reference to a number of biblical narratives; however, it seems likely that they symbolized the apostles—the so-called “fishers of people.”[94] Images of fisherman are varied, ranging from a single man casting a line to several men in boats casting nets. An example of a single fisherman can be seen on an early Christian sarcophagus dating to approximately 270 CE (Fig. 4).[95] The fisherman stands on the far right of the front of the sarcophagus, which also depicts the Good Shepherd, John the Baptist, and a philosopher. Like the previously mentioned fish and boats, fishing and hunting scenes were a popular theme throughout the Greco-Roman world, often signifying abundance, local trades, evoking a specific god or goddess, or just a “doodle” as seen in several examples of ancient graffiti.[96]

Also seen on the 270 CE sarcophagus is a seated philosopher.[97] This motif is less common than the fishermen images, and it usually is placed in compositional proximity to more prevalent, clearly Christian motifs including the Good Shepherd and the orant.[98] The figure is always a male, seated reading a scroll, and wearing a traditionally Greek tunic and beard—the attire of ancient philosophers.[99] Conventionally in Roman funerary art, a seated philosopher served as a portrait for the deceased, usually to attribute the specific characteristics of wisdom and status to the individual. However, in Christian settings, the philosopher takes on an entirely

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[94] Jensen, 47.
[95] ca. 270.. Sarcophagus (oval).. Place: Rome: Church, S. Maria Antiqua., From the Eremita de Santa Julita de Durro, Valle de Boi (province of Lérida).. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31687986.
[96] AGP-EDR167777, The Ancient Graffiti Project, http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR167777. This graffito is one such example. It was found in the Theater Corridor at Pompeii and depicts a hunting scene with horses, hunters, and fish.
[97] ca. 270.. Sarcophagus (oval).. Place: Rome: Church, S. Maria Antiqua., From the Eremita de Santa Julita de Durro, Valle de Boi (province of Lérida).. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31687986.
[98] Jensen, 44.
[99] Jensen, 44.

different meaning. Most interpretations view the philosopher as a symbol for the wisdom of Christianity as the “true philosophy.”[100]

Biblical Scenes and Figures

The second category of symbols consists of biblical scenes and portraits. This section will primarily discuss portrayals of Christs, the apostles, and Old Testament stories and figures. It will also focus on the use of mythological pagan figures to represent Christian personalities.

Early Christian portraits lacked physical resemblance and individuality—a characteristic borrowed from traditionally pagan portraiture. This practice is reminiscent of the Tetrarchy, which occurred around the same time as the rise of Christian art production and portraiture. The art of the Tetrarchs famously shifted away from idealized, classical artistic conventions, instead opting for portraits that functioned as non-individualized representations. This was enforced in imperial portraiture as a way to convey equality among the four rulers, while also giving priority to the symbolic power of the Tetrarch rather than the individual. This same technique is used by early Christians in their representations of religious figures, the earliest of which were the apostles.[101] They are not given individualized, specific features; rather, they are organized and depicted in a formulaic manner that follows a set of conventions. For example, younger religious figures are shown without a beard, whereas mature and wise figures are depicted with long beards.[102] The earliest Christian portraits and figural symbols are representations of the apostles. The earliest known example is a group of bronze commemorative medallions depicting Peter and Paul.[103] These medallions date to the second and third centuries, mostly from Rome. They were originally sold to Christians so that they could venerate the founders of the church. The

[100] Jensen, 45.
[101] Grabar, 68.
[102] Grabar, 33–34.
[103] Grabar, fig. 163.

medallions show Peter and Paul in profile looking at each other. The medallions copy a long-established formula in Roman art that usually features two heads of gods, heroes, or emperors, implying a relationship or parallel between the two figures.[104]

It is commonplace to find scenes from the Old Testament and from the life of Christ in all media, including fresco paintings, sarcophagi, and mosaics. The selected Old Testament scenes usually have a connection to the New Testament, as Christians believed that the events of the Old Testament foreshadow episodes from Christ's life. Among these selected Old Testament scenes are the Sacrifice of Abraham, the exploits of Samson (sometimes represented as Hercules), the Crossing of the Red Sea, Moses Receiving the Law, and others. New Testament scenes usually include the Nativity, the miracles of Christ, and various portrayals of Christ as divine savior. Interestingly, some of these biblical figures and scenes have pagan and mythological parallels.

For example, medieval art historian Herbert Kessler argues that Romulus and Remus clearly resemble Peter and Paul. Romulus and Remus were the heroic founders of Rome who commonly appear in pagan artworks as symbols for Rome and the Empire. Peter and Paul, similarly, were the founders of the Roman church and were thought to be the successors of Romulus and Remus who "ushered in a new golden age of peace and unity."[105] Scenes from the lives of Peter and Paul are common on early Christian ivories and perhaps were borrowed from pagan artistic traditions in order to "replace" them with a new Christian tradition. Early Christian artists purposely chose Peter and Paul because of their parallels to Romulus and Remus in order to appeal to possible pagan converts and assert Christianity. The Church even established Rome's founding day, June 29th, as the festival of Peter and Paul.

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[104] Grabar, 69.
[105] Herbert Kessler, "Scenes from the Acts of the Apostles on Some Early Christian Ivories," *Gesta* 18 (1979): 116.

Resurrection scenes also demonstrate the borrowing of pagan imagery for early Christian dogmatic scenes. The early Resurrection and Descent into Hell scenes were based on Roman images of victory in which the emperor "liberates" a conquered city or province from tyrannical leaders and barbarism.[106] In Christian contexts, Jesus "liberates" the sinners in hell as he is resurrected.

Portraits of Christ were the some of the most frequent figural motifs and were incredibly varied. We have already examined symbolic representations of Christ with the Good Shepherd. He appears as both a child and an adult (usually bearded and wearing a toga), typically in compositions referencing miracles or scenes from his life. However, some church leaders condemned portraits of Christ, believing it was impossible, and even sacrilegious, to depict the true form of God. In a letter to Constantia, Emperor Constantine's sister, Eusebius describes his opposition to portraits of Christ in his true divine form:

> Who, then, would be able to represent by means of dead colors and inanimate delineations the glistening, flashing radiance of such dignity and glory, when even His superhuman disciples could not bear to behold Him in this guise and fell on their faces…[107]

However, Eusebius later argued that other portrayals of Christ, ones that did not attempt to show his true divine form, were acceptable. These types of portraits often include Christ in his human form or representations of him as the Good Shepherd or the lamb.

While the variety of portraits of Christ is extensive, I will primarily focus on common portrayals of Christ that have mythical pagan origins, including the figures of Orpheus, Apollo and Sol, and Ulysses. Found frequently in funerary art, representations of these figures "merit the title…of '*christianus*'" based on how they are used to symbolize Christ and Christian themes.[108]

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[106] Grabar, 125–126.
[107] Eusebius, "Letter to Constantia" in *Icon: Studies in the History of An Idea*, by Moshe Barasch (NYU: NYU Press, 1993).
[108] Huskinson, 85.

While Ulysses and Sol seem to have been associated with the figure of Christ himself, Orpheus serves as more of an allegory of Paradise or the "song" of Christ, or perhaps even an example of the triumph of Christianity since Orpheus was said to have converted to monotheism.[109] Christian art was primarily concerned with scenes of Orpheus taming wild animals (the wild animals being sinners and nonbelievers). Orpheus serves as an allegory for Christ who is "taming" the souls of men through his "song" (teachings).[110] In a fresco from the Catacomb of Domitilla in Rome, Christ-Orpheus, on the far right, sits on a rock playing the pan flute to a flock of sheep, goats, and cows.[111] The pastoral setting also recalls Paradise and themes of salvation through Christ, just as with the Good Shepherd motif.

The image of Sol, the sun god, as a representation of Christ is also quite common. Prior to the early Christians, the *Sol Invictus* image type was frequently used in imperial art and propaganda to equate the emperor with divinity.[112] The Christians adopted this same motif for Christ to imply his divinity as well as his role in salvation as psychopomp. In a mosaic (Fig. 5) in the Mausoleum of the Julii (c. 250-275 CE) at St. Peter's Basilica, Christ is depicted as the sun god, complete with a horse-drawn chariot and beaming halo.[113] In his left hand is a globe and his right hand was originally in a salutary gesture—both of which signify power and kingdom—two motifs borrowed directly from Roman imperial portraiture.[114] The premise of the sun pulled by Christ-Sol serves as a symbol for rebirth and resurrection after the apocalypse.[115]

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[109] Huskinson, 71.
[110] Stevenson, 101.
[111] III.. Wall (20" x 36").. Place: Rome: Cemetery, Catacomba di Domitilla., Single leaf ms. from Delhi, India.. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31687912.
[112] Huskinson, 78.
[113] c.250-275 A.D. Rome: Mausoleum of the Julii: Vault Mosaic: Christ as Sol Salutis. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001582251.
[114] Huksinson, 78.
[115] Huskinson, 78–79.

The reinterpretation of the story of Ulysses with a Christian context is much more prevalent in texts than in art. Christians identified with Ulysses and his struggle to reach home and remain strong in the face of extreme adversity—symbolic of the individual Christian's journey to salvation, which requires one to remain faithful amid sin and temptation.[116] This image-type of Christ as Ulysses is much less common than other representations of Christ and is difficult to prove a clear Christian significance due to a plethora of interpretations.[117]

The iconic Greek hero Hercules can also be labeled as "christianus." Like Mercury, Hercules is associated with the afterlife and psychopomp because, during his twelve labors, he traveled to the Underworld and back successfully. Hercules is also commonly used to symbolize triumph over death, which for Christians was eternal life in Paradise after death.[118] There is only one surviving example of scenes of Hercules in Christian art: a fresco series depicting the labors of Hercules in the catacomb of Via Latina c. fourth century.[119] It is important to note that no other clearly identifiable Christian motifs survive in this room, so its Christian interpretation cannot be completely substantiated. Christians were not the only ones to use catacomb tombs; it is entirely possible that the cubicula could have belonged to a pagan family and has no Christian significance. However, clear Christian imagery is seen throughout the rest of the catacomb, including biblical scenes including the Raising of Lazarus and Daniel in the Lion's Den.[120]

One of the most prevalent images of Christ now is the Crucifixion scene. However, the earliest known image of the Crucifixion is a fifth-century relief panel on the doors of the Church

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[116] Huskinson, 81.
[117] Huskinson, 81.
[118] Huskinson, 82.
[119] 4th C. A.D. Catacomb of Via Latina: det.: Hercules and the Hydra. fresco. https://library-artstor-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000577542.
[120] https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zearly/1/2mural/5vialati/index.html

of Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill.[121] So why did this popular motif develop relatively late compared to the previously mentioned images? Mary Joan Winn Leith and Allyson Everingham Schekler suggest several possible explanations, including depictions of crucifixion being associated with Greco-Roman magic or that the motif first developed in the East.[122] However, there is also evidence that pre-Constantinian images of crucifixion were considered shameful, and early Christians "could not afford to associate the culturally offensive image" with their religious movement.[123] A fascinating early third-century graffito (Fig. 6) from the Palatine Hill provides evidence for crucifixion's association with public humiliation and may serve as an example of satire by a pagan artist mocking Christians.[124] The graffito depicts a crucified donkey-headed man and a male worshipper.[125] The inscription below the cross reads: Alexamenos worships his god, possibly referring to Christ.[126] Crucifixion scenes were not widely accepted until after the rise of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, when a distinct Christian iconography had developed.

Reuse of Pagan Spaces

Not only did early Christians adopt and borrow visual motifs, iconography, and characters from pagan artistic traditions, they also claimed and reused pagan spaces and architecture. The conversion of pagan temples in Rome was motivated by practicality and

[121] Allyson Everingham Scheckler and Mary Joan Winn Leith, "The Crucifixion Conundrum and the Santa Sabina Doors," *The Harvard Theological Review* 103 (Jan. 2010), 67.
[122] Everingham Scheckler and Winn Leith, 70–73. They reference a handful of engraved gemstones from the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria (dating from the late second century through the mid-fourth century CE) that depict clear images of crucifixions.
[123] Everyingham Scheckler and Winn Leith, 75–76.
[124] Brian Palmer, "When Did Christians Stop Crucifying People?" *Valley News* (Mar. 31, 2013), http://umiss.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/newspapers/when-did-christians-stop-crucifying-people/docview/1321760223/se-2?accountid=14588.
[125] Museo Palatino, Graffito with a Man Worshipping a Donkey-Headed Man on the Cross, first half of the third century CE, plaster, 38 x 33 cm, Rome.
[126] Museo Palatino, Graffito with a Man Worshipping a Donkey-Headed Man on the Cross.

accessibility rather than *ecclesia triumphans*, or the triumphalist church, a term that refers to a theory about the Christian church's re-use and destruction of non-Christian temples and religious sites to "conquer" paganism.

Early sources and scholars cited the conversion of pagan temples as a means for the Christian church to "express its triumph over paganism."[127] However, recent scholarship has explored this theory in greater depth, with many authors questioning its validity. Contemporary scholars, notably Feyo Schuddeboom, now argue that conversion of buildings was a practical and common practice that had nothing to do with conquering paganism. This theory addresses the lack of space, funds, materials, and time to build new Christian structures. The reuse of buildings and materials was already an established practice for centuries, and Christians appear to have only converted complete ancient structures and the materials from decrepit buildings. It would have been much more cost-effective and pragmatic to reuse old, intact structures for new Christian buildings. Furthermore, there were no temple conversions in Rome during the fourth and fifth centuries, rather all conversions happened much later beginning in the seventh century "long after the demise of paganism" and mystery religions.[128] Only 11 out of 424 of the existing temples in Rome were converted, most likely due to their architectural quality rather than their association with pagan religions.[129] During the conversion process, pagan temples were managed in essentially the same way as public and secular buildings.

Mithraea were single-room temples built to resemble caves where the cult of Mithras, a popular mystery religion, worshipped and practiced religious rituals. *Mithraea* were intentionally destroyed and Christian churches built atop the rubble during the fourth and fifth centuries, a

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[127] Feyo L. Schuddeboom, "The Conversion of Temples in Rome," *Journal of Late Antiquity* (vol. 10, 2017), 166.
[128] Schuddeboom, 176.
[129] Schuddeboom, 167.

direct contrast to the non-destruction of traditional state temples. *Mithraea* were "physically erased" and used to form the foundation of newly built Christian churches.[130] So, why were *mithraea* intentionally erased whereas temples were reused? *Mithraea* were privately owned. Temples were classified as *res sacre*, meaning they were sacred public property owned by the state and could not be used or destroyed without proper legal actions and approval.[131] Whereas *Mithraea* were *res privatia*, or privately owned, meaning they could be purchased or donated.[132] The owner could do whatever he wished with the property, including deconstructing any existing structures and constructing new churches in their place. Three examples of churches built over *mithraea* survive today: Santa Prisca (constructed c. 400 CE), San Clemente (built in 410 CE), and Santo Stefano Rotondo (c. 450 CE).[133] Today, San Clemente even offers tours for visitors to explore the first century *mithraeum* below the early church's foundation.

The first temple to be converted was the Pantheon, and the conversion did not occur until 608 CE. It was renamed St. Mary of the Martyrs. In pagan times, it functioned as a temple to all ("pan") the gods or possibly as a ceremonial space for the worship of the imperial family. Statues of Augustus and Agrippa once stood on the front porch of the temple's entrance. The Pantheon also likely served as a courtroom where the emperor would hear and judge cases.[134] However, what made this particular building so appealing to the early Christians was its excellent construction. The current structure had been built in 125 CE and by 608 CE, it was still standing strong. The Pantheon is justifiably famous for details of its construction: the coffers (recessed panels to lighten the weight of the dome) in the ceiling, the *oculus* at the center of the rotunda,

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[130] Schuddeboom, 171.
[131] Scheddeboom, 180.
[132] Schuddeboom, 180.
[133] Schuddeboom, 170–171.
[134] Amanda Claridge, Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231–232.

and thick concrete walls to support the dome.[135] The innovative construction is what helped the Pantheon survive for centuries and made it a suitable and convenient location for the first converted church.

Of the eleven known temple conversions in Rome, only five, including the Pantheon, were completed conversions with minimal changes to the original structure. The other four temples were the temple of Antoninus and Faustina (converted to San Lorenzo in Miranda c. 600-800 CE), the Temple to Hercules Victor in the Forum Boarium (converted to Santo Stefano delle Carrozze c. 700-900 CE), the Temple of Portunus also in the Forum Boarium (converted to the Church of Santa Maria de Secundicerio c. 872-882 CE), and the temple of Ceres and Faustina (converted to the church of Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella c. 850-900 CE).[136] Two other churches, the church of San Nicola dei Cesarini and San Nicola in Carcere, were built into preexisting temples that were already in a state of disrepair. San Nicola dei Cesarini was built using the *cella* and colonnade of the temple of Juturna at Largo Argentina in the eighth or ninth century.[137] San Nicola in Carcere was built using the surviving architecture of three temples, including that of Juno Sospita, in the Forum Holitorium.[138] The remaining four churches were essentially built on top of the podia and foundations of old pagan temples that no longer stood. These included the famous temple of Venus and Roma (converted to Sancti Petrus et Paulus c. 757-767 CE), the temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus (converted to San Basilio in the ninth century), the Heliogabalium on the Palatine Hill (converted to the church of San Sebastian al Palatino in

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[135] Claridge, 226–231.
[136] Schuddeboom, 173–175.
[137] Schuddeboom, 174.
[138] Schuddeboom, 174.

the tenth century), and the temple of Aesculapius on the Tiber Island (converted to the church of San Bartolomeo all'Isola c. 998-999 CE).[139]

After Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 312 CE, he began to sponsor the construction of Christian churches; the most important was the old Saint Peter's, now known as the Vatican. The St. Peter's Basilica that exists today is the second church on this site, built during the Renaissance to replace the one commissioned by Constantine in 319 CE.[140] The site chosen for the Vatican had particular significance for the Christians—they claimed that beneath the basilica was the tomb of St. Peter who was martyred in the second century. In fact, beneath the Vatican lies an extensive network of tombs and burials, both Christian and pagan. Early Christians wished to be buried close to martyrs and saints. So how is St. Peter's an example of recontextualizing pagan spaces? On the site of the Vatican originally stood the Circus of Nero (built by Caligula), a long ovular racetrack typically used for public events and chariot races in the second century CE.[141] During breaks between races, Emperor Nero would hold public executions of Christians. This is where Peter was martyred. He was brought to be buried somewhere nearby, (now believed to be directly beneath the altar of the basilica). The outline of the circus can be seen in aerial views and plans of the current church. In fact, the famous Egyptian obelisk in the basilica's courtyard once marked the center of the racetrack.

When building Old St. Peter's, Christians had to create an architectural design that would accommodate their needs. Pagan temples were reserved for the cult statue of the deity and the priests. All activity took place outside of the temple, whereas the Christians worshipped inside.[142] As a result, Christian architects looked to public buildings, especially the basilica. Prior

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[139] Schuddeboom, 174–176.
[140] Fred S. Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2007), 299.
[141] R.A. Staccioli, *Ancient Rome: Rome from Caesars to Popes* (Rome: VISION S.r.l., 2019), 91–94.
[142] Kleiner 299–201.

to its Christian connotation, the basilica provided public law courts and is typically found in all surviving Roman fora. The basilica was a large open space with a nave and colonnaded aisles. It was one of the most trafficked public buildings, as evidenced by the extraordinary amount of graffiti found in surviving forum basilicas, as at Pompeii. The Christians adapted this floorplan because it easily accommodated large numbers of people and congregations.[143] Also, unlike pagan basilicas, Christians spent more time decorating the interior of their churches as opposed to the exterior. The walls were ornamented with paintings, mosaics, and sculptures depicting biblical scenes that reflected the sermons.

Christians reused spaces and borrowed preexisting artistic conventions and motifs because it was convenient and the motifs were ubiquitous. They copied the art and practices of the Greco-Roman world around them and applied them to Christian principles. The influence of paganism on the development of Early Christian art is impossible to dismiss. So many of the motifs and traditions of the Christian artistic canon derive from pagan sources. While the impact of paganism on Christian art is well documented, there is another equally important factor, which is rarely acknowledged in scholarship, that greatly shaped the origins and development of Early Christian art: women. The next chapter will discuss the enormous impact of women and socio-economic classes on the inception and evolution of the early Christian artistic canon.

[143] Kleiner, 299–301.

CHAPTER IV:
THE IMPACT OF WOMEN ON EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

In this chapter, I will attempt to create a more holistic understanding of the early Christians and their art by including women's contributions through discussion of their roles as church leaders, patrons, and subjects of artworks. My supporting evidence primarily will come from examining artworks and objects, including jewelry and gemstones, funerary art, and inscriptions. The contributions of women to Early Christian art are often overlooked and ignored. Most surviving material comes from elite males (artists and patrons) because wealthy men could afford durable, long-lasting materials and held most power and authority in this patriarchal society. Women were rarely given autonomy, authority, or financial independence that would have allowed them to have a strong presence in the archaeological and historical record, especially when considering that most primary texts and documents have been male-authored and written for a male audience. The little evidence remaining from women is typically from wealthy women and households. The simple fact that physical evidence from the lower classes, enslaved peoples, and women (especially poor women) does not survive today does not mean that they did not have a significant impact on the ancient world: "the absence of evidence…" should not be equated with "the evidence of absence."[144] The goal of this chapter is to shed light on the enormous contributions of women to the development of Christianity and Early Christian art.

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[144] Adam Levine, "Re-imaging encounters between late antique viewers and early Christian art," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, vol. 7 (2016), 30.

Recent scholarship, primarily led by female academics with a background in gender theory, art history, archaeology, and early Christianity, has begun to examine the surviving material and influence of Christian women from this time-period. According to Christine Schenk and Janet Tulloch, women served as influential early leaders and patrons and were primarily responsible for the rapid spread and popularization of Christianity.[145] Past scholars, including Dorothy Irvin, published works on women's participation in early Christianity as well as critiques of modern interpretations and practices that excluded women from past narratives.[146] However, Irvin and other female scholars working around the 1980s were largely dismissed at the time by the male-dominated field and scholarship.[147] In the following sections of this chapter, I will examine and discuss the evidence for women as early church leaders, as patronesses, and as subjects in Early Christian art and archaeology.

So why were women of all classes especially drawn to Christianity at its beginning? The idea of salvation was novel and attractive to Romans, but for women it went beyond the idea of an afterlife. Schenk argues that because of Christianity's emphasis on celibacy and virginity, women, no longer restrained by traditional roles as wife and child-bearer, could participate in religion in ways not defined by their gender or sexuality.[148] Women in Rome were constrained by Augustan marriage laws and were forced to have children at a time with an incredibly high mortality rate for both children and mothers during childbirth.[149] The initial freedom granted to

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[145] Christine Schenk, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xvi.
[146] Marjorie Hyer, "Scholar Cites Evidence of Early Women Priests," *The Washington Post* (April 2, 1980), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1980/04/02/scholar-cites-evidence-of-early-women-priests/fd9406fc-7bc4-4012-9b47-373b34361d74/.
[147] Janet Tulloch, "Art and Archaeology as an Historical Resource for the Study of Women in Early Christianity: An Approach for Analyzing Visual Data," in *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology*, 12 (May 2004), 293.
[148] Schenk, 48.
[149] Judith Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2002), 83–84. Emperor Augustus passed several laws in 18 BCE to "promote marriage and child-bearing among Roman citizens." These

women by Christianity allowed them to renounce sex in the name of God and piety, and thus many women were no longer obligated to fulfill these hetero-normative gender roles and could instead explore other activities and jobs within the Christian community, including leadership roles.

Women as Church Leaders

The evidence for women as church leaders is greater than I initially thought as I started my research. Part of the reason why this evidence is not well-known or studied is because it can be found mostly in the art historical and archaeological record, not in the male-authored primary texts and sources. When the official Church was formed, authority was given to male leaders. Schenk points out that early church orders provide several clues about early Christian communities and women's roles:

> Early church orders are not only descriptive of early communities but prescriptive insofar as opposed to what was actually happening. When church orders repeatedly prohibit women from teaching and baptizing, they illuminate the reality that women were doing both and the practice was probably widespread…Texts disclose how much time and energy was spent trying to control the behavior of independent Christian women, especially widows.[150]

Many of these male theologians, including St. Jerome, only wrote about women in reference to "the chastisement and moral uplift of women."[151] Authors ignored women's contributions or

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laws stated that all male citizens (aged 25-60) and all female citizens (aged 20-50) had to be married. Widows had to remarry within 2-3 years after their husband's death, and divorced women within 18 months. Those who did not comply could not receive inheritances. And those who were married but did not have children were also punished by the state withholding half of any inheritances. The marriage laws also prohibited higher-status citizens from marrying women who were enslaved, actors, prostitutes, and condemned adulteresses.

[150] Schenk, 69. These texts include *Apostolic Tradition, Didascalia Apostolorum, Apostolic Constitutions*, and *Testamentum Domini. Apostolic Tradition* (third century) "specifically instructs church leaders not to ordain widows." *Testamentum Domini* (fourth century) clearly includes and vouches for ordained women in the church's hierarchy.

[151] Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2 (Summer 1994), 170. Women in Greco-Roman society were expected to be the moral heart of the empire. They were to be obedient wives and mothers who spent all waking hours spinning wool for their families. However, the reality was that most wealthy women and working women would not have spun at all. Christian writers, like pagan Roman writers before them, attempted to equate the success and stability of the empire or the world with the morality and social roles of women in order to keep women under control.

roles in the church and instead focused on the qualities, appearances, and actions that make a "moral Christian woman," including virginity, piety, modesty, and remaining in traditional feminine roles, which would not have included leadership.

In 2014, archaeologists discovered a tomb in the fourth-century church of San Miceli in Salemi, Sicily, one of the oldest Christian churches in the Roman Empire. This peculiar tomb, labeled Tomb 54, was the resting place of a woman. Scholars believe she was an important figure or church leader since she was buried in front of the altar next to a priest, a location "typically reserved for religious leaders."[152] What is further interesting was the state of her tomb:

> "The mosaic covering the tomb was destroyed, obliterating her identity, but her jewelry with religious symbolism and bones were found intact. The defacing of her identity was not motivated by theft, otherwise there would be no jewelry and the bones would have been disturbed."[153]

The state of her tomb, combined with its prominent location, points to her significant role within the church, either as a wealthy patron or, more likely in my opinion, as a church official. Several other female graves have been discovered around the basilica—more evidence for women's involvement as leaders, followers, and patrons of the early church. As Carina Prestes, one of the archaeologists at San Miceli, points out: wealthy women largely supported the church financially, provided spaces for meetings and sermons (in house-churches), and often donated property after their deaths.[154]

There is a plethora of evidence in funerary inscriptions and artworks that name women as church leaders including the titles *deacon*, *presbyter*, and *bishop*. Early archaeologists and

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[152] Carina O. Prestes, "Archaeologists Uncover Clues About Women in Early Christianity," *Visitor Magazine*, http://www.columbiaunionvisitor.com/2019/archaeologists-uncover-clues-about-women-early-christianity.
[153] Prestes.
[154] Prestes. Many of the homes of wealthy women that were previously used as house-churches were donated to the church and later rebuilt as basilicas. They are sometimes named after female saints or patrons to honor their donation and service. We also see this trend with catacombs, many of which are named for prominent Christian women who likely donated the land for the catacombs or money to maintain them or grow the church.

historians normally interpreted these titles as applicable to the woman's husband rather than the deceased woman herself. Schenk states that *presbytera* was also interpreted to signify an elderly woman rather than being associated with a priestly role.[155] Some scholars may argue that presbyter was used to identify elderly men and women; however, there are instances in which presbytera refers to a woman who was neither elderly nor the wife of a priest.[156] A tombstone for a woman from Centuripae in Sicily, reads: Here lies the presbyter Kale who lived 50 years without reproach. Her life ended on 14 September. Here, presbyter refers to her role as a church leader. Prestes notes that the inscription includes the Greek work *amemptos* (meaning "without reproach"), which is often used in connection with or to refer to Sicilian church leaders.

I will mention three other examples of women, all of whom lived contemporaneously and served as church officials. The first is Flavia Vitalia, who is mentioned in a "proof-of-purchase" inscription found in Croatia dating to c. 425 CE:

> Under our Lord Theodosius, consul for the eleventh time, and Valentinian, most noble man of Caesar, I, Theodosius bought [a tomb] from the matron Flavia Vitalia the holy presbyter for three golden solids.[157]

Schenk states that after Constantine and the Edict of Milan, coinciding with the phasing out of *fossores*, presbyters, like Flavia Vitalia, assumed the responsibility of managing cemeteries and burial sites.[158] This explains why her name is listed on this inscription and also reaffirms her role as a church official.

At the same time that Flavia was presbyter, two women in Naples, Bitalia and Cerula, were also serving as church leaders. Prestes notes that frescoes (Fig. 7-8) from the Catacomb of San Gennaro depict both women in prayer (similar to the gesture of orants figures) accompanied

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[155] Schenk, 89.
[156] Schenk, 90.
[157] Schenk, 141.
[158] Schenk, 141–142.

by the *chi-rho*, as well as the books of the Gospels and the tongues of fire.[159] Only one other fresco portrait is painted in the same manner: the depiction of a known male bishop who was martyred. The fact that Bitalia and Cerula are depicted in an identical manner to the male bishop clearly indicates that they were important members of the church. Prestes also notes that The Apostolic Constitutions, "a fourth-century manual for clergy," states that for a bishop to be ordained, a deacon must hold the open Gospels above his or her head, which could explain why the Gospels are included by Bitalia's and Cerula's heads in the frescos—perhaps they were in fact bishops.[160] The tongues of fire provide further support for this theory as they are commonly interpreted as symbols for "the descent of the Holy Spirit" onto a pious individual.[161]

There is also evidence for women as bishops (*epsicopae*). An inscription on a fifth- to sixth-century tombstone from Umbria clearly states: "Here rests the venerable woman bishop Q…"[162] In Latin, the word for bishop, episcopus, takes the feminine form, episcopa, to agree with *fem* (woman), clearly indicating that the woman Q was the bishop, rather than signifying her relationship (i.e. wife) to a male bishop.[163]

Paul wrote about Phoebe, a woman who served as a patron of the Church (Romans 16:1–2). He also refers to her as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae, which is located in Corinth.[164] Later, *diakonos* signified deacon, but in the first century, it was a less-clearly defined term used to refer to the role of a minister.[165] By the fourth century, the term *diakonos* had developed to its

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[159] Prestes. The inclusion of the Gospels and books in general in female catacomb portraits is extremely rare. We know they are the Gospels because the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are clearly visible on the pages.
[160] Prestes
[161] Prestes
[162] Prestes
[163] Prestes
[164] "Early Women Leaders: From Heads of House Churches to Presbyters," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 8, 2013, https://www.ncronline.org/news/theology/early-women-leaders-heads-house-churches-presbyters.
[165] "Early Women Leaders: From Heads of House Churches to Presbyters"

modern connotation, and there were several references to deaconesses, although their roles were much more restrictive than their male counterparts. [166]

It was common for women like Phoebe to support the church as both a patron and an official. In addition to holding a pastoral-like role and hosting a house-church, Phoebe also donated to fund the Church's "missionary outreach," which was essential to the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

Women as Patrons

In addition to serving as early leaders of the Church, women were also prominent patrons who sponsored major artworks, donated money to build churches and cemeteries, and even offered their own homes for church service and activities at the earliest stages of Christianity. Most of these women were wealthy widows who used their husband's money to support the Church as well as other members of the community, especially poor widows and children.[167] Schenk argues that wealthy widows were instrumental in the spread of Christianity because they were the Church's primary benefactors and were quite successful in gaining converts.[168]

> Through the house church, early Christians gained access to social networks that brought them into contact with people from diverse social classes. When a female head of household, perhaps a wealthy widow or freed woman, converted to Christianity, Christian evangelists…gained access not only to her domestic household but also to her patronage network. This meant that her slaves, freed persons, children, relatives, and patronal clients would often convert as well.[169]

This partly explains how Christianity was able to spread so rapidly within Rome and its empire.

There is remarkable evidence for women's influence and impact on the Church in funerary art and inscriptions, like the female burial in Tomb 54 found at San Miceli in Salemi. Schenk analyzed numerous funerary portraits of Christian women and found many examples of

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[166] Schenk, 53.
[167] Schenk, 54–55.
[168] Schenk, 54–55.
[169] Schenk, 34.

"solo female portraits—single women or widows" who are depicted in a manner that suggests "they proclaimed or taught Scripture."[170] The wealthy single women who sponsored artworks and paid for elaborate burials were the same women who served as deacons, presbyters, teachers, and even held worship in their now so-called "house-churches."

House-churches (*domus ecclesiae*) were domestic spaces that had been converted into rooms used for Christian worship, prayer, sermons, and baptisms. These spaces were common beginning in the middle of the first century through the early third century when purpose-built places of worship began to be constructed.[171] Many of the house-churches looked like typical elite Roman houses with stores or workshops on the street level and domestic spaces above.[172] In the earliest years of the house-church, worship, meals, and gatherings would have taken place in large rooms such as *triclinia* (dining rooms).[173] Later, in the third century, designated rooms were designed and decorated to serve as a specified Christian meeting space. The most well-known surviving example of this type is the Christian house-church at Dura-Europos, dating to before 256 CE.[174] House-churches were the key to Christianity's survival and growth in the first few centuries CE, and many of these spaces belonged to elite women.

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[170] Christine Schenk, "Archaeology and Female Authority in the Early Church," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 6, 2019, https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/scripture-life/archaeology-and-female-authority-early-church.
[171] Joan M. Petersen, "House-Churches in Rome," *Vigiliae Christianae* 23, no. 4 (December 1969): 266.
[172] Petersen, 271.
[173] Petersen, 264–272. Since the earliest house-churches looked identical to non-Christian households in Rome, it is nearly impossible to find evidence of these structures in the archaeological record. However, some later churches in Rome were built over these early house-churches and remnants of the earlier structures exist within and below the modern buildings. These examples include the Church of Sant'Anastasia, the Church of San Clemente, and the Church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo. The *tituli* (property titles) of the pre-existing house-churches belong, respectively, to Anastasia, Clement, and Byzans or Pammachius.
[174] Steven Fine, "Dura Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity and Edge of Empires: Pagans, Jews, and Christians at Dura-Europos," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 74, no. 4 (December 2011): 16–20. The private house was converted into a church in 240–241. The reconfigured spaced included an assembly hall (which held about 75 people), a baptistery, and courtyard. The Dura house-church is also notable for its preserved wall-paintings which depict scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

Several women are mentioned in letters, early Church documents, and biblical texts as leaders and patronesses of house-churches. A woman named Nympha and her house-church are mentioned in the New Testament (Colossians 4:15–16). Nympha was an important leader and minister in Laodicea two centuries before women were prohibited from entering and serving in that same church.[175] There is also mention of a house-church in the New Testament belonging to and led by Aquilla and Priscilla (Romans 16.5 and 1 Corinthians 16.24).[176] The widow Tabitha, who cared for less fortunate women and children, ran a house-church in Joppa, Israel (Acts 9:36–43).[177] In several of his letters, Ignatius of Antioch mentions and even addresses many women who led house-churches in Asia Minor including, Tavia, Alce, Epitripus's wife, "elect women," etc.[178]

In addition to leading early house-churches, women also sponsored the creation of burial sites and catacombs. Several of Rome's famous catacombs, including Lucina, Domitilla, and Priscilla were named after the wealthy women who donated the land.[179] Women also served as patrons of the arts and contributed to the establishment of the early Christian iconographical canon. Evidence for women as patrons and users of art can be found in the writings of early church officials and in minor arts, including jewelry and carved gemstones.

Clement of Alexandria wrote a treatise in which he outlines "well-known prescriptions" for finger rings including acceptable and unacceptable images, as well as guidelines for women

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[175] Schenk, 54.
[176] Petersen, 264–265.
[177] Schenk (54) suggests that Tabitha was also a disciple since she is referred to as *mathetria*, the feminine form of *mathetes*, meaning disciple of Christ. This is the only known reference to a female disciple in the New Testament.
[178] Schenk, 56–57.
[179] Stevenson, 25–27. Interestingly, Flavia Domitilla was the niece of Emperor Domitian, who enacted the so-called "reign of terror" against the Senate during the end of his reign. Surviving documents, including historical books by Cassius Dio and writings by Eusebius, suggest that Flavia and her consul husband, Flavius Clemens, were targeted for their religion. Flavius Clemens was executed and Flavia Domitilla was exiled from Rome. The catacomb was constructed on Flavia's lands after her banishment.; Schenk, 169. Other catacombs named for women include "Commodilla, Lucina, Balbina, Thecla, Bassilla, Agnes, and Felicitas."

versus men.[180] This guideline suggests that it was common for Christian women of his time to commission and wear rings. In Paedagogus 3.57.1–3.60.1, Clement acknowledges that women are permitted to wear gold rings, according to Christ, but only while "discharging their domestic duties."[181] However, Clement also points out that women and men are not allowed to wear such jewelry and rings purely for aesthetic purposes—they are meant to be functional. Women should wear finger rings on their joints and only while conducting business. Clement clearly identifies only five acceptable images for such rings: a dove, a fish, a ship, a lyre, and a ship's anchor.[182] He denounces the use of idols (portraits of the pagan gods), swords, bows, drinking cups, and lovers.[183] Clement's views may have served as a guideline for faithful Christians, but the extent to which men and women actually followed his strict rules is unknown.

Surviving examples of early Christian rings and carved gemstones indicate that other images and signs were used on a large scale. Most early Christian rings are categorized either as biblical subjects or Greco-Roman subjects, both of which are not included as acceptable images by Clement.[184] Although some of his accepted motifs, including fish, were common, a majority of surviving rings and gems consist of biblical figures, angels, crucifixes, the Good Shepherd, the chi-rho monogram, and portraits, some of which include women.[185] Jeffrey Spier presents three such examples on silver discs, that were inlaid in rings or pendants and were popular during the

[180] Paul Corby Finney, "Images on Finger Rings and Early Christian Art," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987): 181–182.
[181] Finney, 182. Domestic duties refer to managing the household, its goods, and property. In this context, the permitted ring would include a seal that could be used to mark items and documents with the owner's or household's name. I postulate that such rings could also have been utilized by independent women who owned their own property and wealth, served as leaders in the Church, and led early house-churches—they were not solely used by wives during daily duties and managing their husband's house and property.
[182] Finney, 184.
[183] Finney, 184.
[184] Finney, 186.
[185] Jeffrey Spier, "Late Antique and Early Christian Gems: Some Unpublished Examples," in *"Gems of Heaven:" Recent Research on Engraved Gemstones in Late Antiquity c. AD 200–600*, ed. Chris Entwistle and Noel Adams (London: The British Museum, 2011), 193–207.

fourth century CE.[186] Each of these examples depicts a woman with her husband, as well as both of their names inscribed in Latin or Greek.[187] These engraved portraits are easily identifiable as Christian because they include the phrase VIVA or VIVATIS IN DEO, a reference to the one Christian god.[188] Not much is known about the women featured in these portraits. Scholars only know their names and their faith, and can reasonably infer that they were wealthy. Not only did Christian women commission artworks for themselves, their families, or the church, they also served as subjects for some of these artworks. These portraits and references to women in art provide much more information about their influence and contributions to the early Church.

Women as Subjects

Women frequently appear as subjects in Early Christian art, especially in funerary contexts. Representations of women provide art historians with information about women, their roles in the church and society, their socio-economic status, as well as society's treatment and expectations for women at this time period. Female figures in Early Christian art are historically interpreted as being more symbolic than representational of real women because certain virtues and concepts (i.e. piety, the Church, fertility, etc.) were given feminine endings in Latin and personified by idealized female figures in Greco-Roman art. However, by interpreting such figures in a general symbolic manner, art historians ignore the real Christian women and any information that provides clues about their lives.

As discussed in Chapter III, the orants figure was a prevalent image-type in Early Christian art, especially in funerary contexts. The orants consists of a veiled female figure in prayer, generally interpreted as a symbol for piety. The tradition of using female figures to

[186] Spier, 193.
[187] Spier. 193. One example also includes the featured couple's child, as a sort-of family portrait.
[188] Spier 194.

represent virtues precedes Christian usage and was a common practice in Greco-Roman iconography.[189] Traditionally, orants have been interpreted as simply being symbols, rather than portraits of the deceased, which Schenk argues has contributed to the erasure of women from Early Christian art and history.[190] Robin Jensen points out two specific examples in funerary art where the orant clearly functions as more of a portrait rather than as a symbol for the church or piety:

> Possible examples of such use are the image in the catacomb of Priscilla known as *donna velata*, and the orant with doves on the Roman sarcophagus called *della Lungara.* Art historians have identified a few sarcophagi with the faces of these images left blank, as if prepared to receive a portrait likeness.[191]

The *donna velata* ("veiled woman") orant is part of a fresco (Fig. 2) depicting three separate scenes from the deceased woman's life, with the orant comprising the central scene. The fresco has been misinterpreted as scenes relating to motherhood, marriage, and virginity, and even representations of the Virgin and Child.[192] However, Dorothy Irvin and Christine Schenk offer a more plausible explanation: the deceased woman was a church official. The central figure assumes the orant pose in a gesture of prayer while wearing the dalmatic robes and a veil to indicate that she is a deaconess.[193] Nicola Denzey perfectly summarizes how women such as the *donna velata* have been reduced or erased by historians:

> To think of Roman Christian women as intellectuals or philosophers is very different from the dominant Catholic interpretation that tends to classify ancient women not by activity but by life stage: thus women conventionally fall into the categories of virgin,

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[189] Classical figures of goddesses and the muses are an example of this persistent idealized female figure trope, symbolizing the virtues associated with womanhood, life, and piety, including fertility, beauty, grace, faith, etc. The Romans had such figures to represent agriculture and fertility, pietas, and even the personification of Rome itself. Schenk (221) argues that the Christian orant developed from the pietas figure, which for the Romans symbolized the purity and faithfulness of "perfect" wives and mothers.
[190] Schenk, 220.
[191] Robin Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, (Routledge: London, 2000), 35–36.
[192] Nicola Denzey*, Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 77–78. Vatican visitor guides even labeled the fresco as a marriage scene, although there is no evidence to support this claim, including a depiction of the supposed husband. The scene does not follow any of the artistic conventions for wedding scenes or iconography.
[193] Schenk, 134.

> matron, or widow. Instead, we might measure women by the type and quality of their activities."[194]

Contemporary interpretations are now beginning to recognize the orant as a semi-portrait: they represent the deceased's personal values, attributes, and virtues. This interpretation, in my opinion, seems more accurate because it aligns with the conventions of traditional Roman funerary portraits, which were typically idealized, youthful portraits that highlight the accomplishments, careers, or virtues of the deceased. For example, middle-class and wealthy women are often depicted on tombs as veiled alongside tools for spinning—a symbol of a woman's piety and role as a dutiful wife—regardless of whether she actually spent most of her time in the house spinning.

Biblical women, including Eve and Susanna, are found throughout funerary art and are easily recognizable. However, funerary portraits of early Christian women are just as common but are often overlooked or misinterpreted. They are essential to examine because they provide personal details about individual women as well as women in early Christian society in Rome.

We have examined examples of women in frescos throughout this chapter, including the *donna velata*, Bitalia, and Cerula—all of whom were depicted as church leaders. According to Denzey, there is a "remarkably disproportionate number" of female portraits in Christian catacombs.[195] The earliest and most extensive of these portraits are located in the catacombs of Priscilla.[196] The remnants of these women are littered throughout the catacombs of Rome, yet very little is known about them—as Denzey comments: they are "overwhelmingly present without having a presence."[197] Most of these portraits are misinterpreted or ignored by historians,

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[194] Denzey, 86.
[195] Denzey, 81.
[196] Schenk, 121.
[197] Denzey, 81.

scholars, tour guides, and visitors alike.[198] In fact, many of these catacomb women are presented in portraits independent of their husbands or children—they are solitary figures usually engaged in prayer. Like the portraits of the traditional Roman matrons who prioritized wifely duties, Christian women valued piety and dedication to their faith above all else and are represented as such in their commemorative portraits.

In a survey of 312 Christian sarcophagi portraits, 220 were adult women (156 were individual portraits and 64 were part of a couple portrait), compared to 111 portraits of adult men.[199] Many of the solo female portraits represent the deceased as a learned and pious woman, usually accompanied by scrolls or books, or assuming a prayer pose.[200]

One such example is the fourth-century sarcophagus of Crispina (Fig. 9), which includes her portrait on the center of the lid. She holds a codex engraved with the chi-rho, indicating that Crispina was well-educated and dedicated to her faith.[201] Schenk even claims that the portrait expresses Crispina's intense devotion and emotional attachment by the way that she is shown "tenderly cradling" the codex.[202] We know this portrait is not a generalized allegory because her name is inscribed to the right of her portrait, which is physically separated from all other figures by an arch. No other figure on the sarcophagus is labeled—they are likely biblical figures including apostles and Christ. [203]

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[198] Denzey, 81. Denzey comments that tour guides and historians will point out figures like the *donna velata*, saying simply: "here is a painting of a woman or perhaps really a symbol of a pious soul; here is a painting of the Virgin and Child or perhaps only an ordinary woman and her child…No one asks why there are so many images of women at the Catacombs of Priscilla."
[199] Schenk, 210.
[200] Schenk, 230–237.
[201] Schenk, 195–196. Crispina is one of the few fourth-century women to have her name inscribed on her funerary portrait.
[202] Schenk, 195-6.
[203] Schenk, 196-198.

These funerary portraits of Christian women, such as Crispina, are essential to our understanding of how women lived during late antiquity. Funerary portraits were more than just a representation of the deceased: they tell us how a woman saw herself, how she wanted to present and immortalize herself, what she (and early Christian society) valued, and how she lived her life in the Christian community. These portraits give us so much information, yet they are severely understudied and undervalued. My goal for this chapter, and this thesis, is to call attention to the lives and evidence pertaining to these ancient women who had a significant impact on the popularization, development, and continuation of the early church, and without whom its existence would have been impossible.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Christianity overwhelmingly transformed the Western world in nearly every aspect, and the art of early Christianity fundamentally changed how viewers interact with visual culture. The art produced during between the first century CE and fifth century CE is a reflection of this transformation but also a reminder of the individuals and traditions that made it possible. In the previous chapters, I have discussed the complex nature of the beginnings of this enduring religious and artistic movement, and highlighted the visual culture and marginalized women who were directly responsible for the success of Christianity. Through studying the surviving objects, artworks, and texts, it is possible to present a more holistic and accurate understanding of early Christian identity, influences, and concerns.

The first, and more widely acknowledged by scholars, influence on Early Christian art was Greco-Roman artistic traditions and motifs. Recent scholars including Margaret Jensen and Mary Charles Murray have begun to address misconceptions about the timeline and study of Early Christian art that emphasize its relationship to pagan art. The beginning of Christian art has been pinpointed by Andre Grabar to c. 200 CE with fresco paintings in distinctly Christian catacombs.[204] However, this chronology is entirely based on a date for the catacombs, which is merely an estimate and most likely inaccurate.[205] This chronology also does not explain the gap between the foundation of Christianity and the production of Christian art around 200 CE. Prior

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[204] Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1968), 7.
[205] Grabar, 7; Adam Levine, "Re-imagining Encounters Between Late Antique Viewers and Early Christian Art," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 7 (2016), 29.

to the 1970s, this gap was explained by the early church's aversion to images with church officials viewing them as a "progressive paganization of the church."[206] However, it is my opinion that the gap was caused by social, cultural, and political factors including lack of funds and support by the elite ruling class. The earliest Christian art may not have been of a visual nature but rather included "gospels, hymns, sermons, and letters"—verbal arts that were inexpensive and accessible to most followers of the Christian faith.[207] Christian art developed a strong identity and confidence during the fourth century when there was a drastic increase in the number of public, practicing Christians, especially among the elite classes who would have sponsored a majority of artwork.[208] Thus, Christian identity and artistic style was influenced primarily by the tastes of this elite, ruling class that advocated for a certain level of opulence and skill in the works they commissioned. As a result, "Christian art as formally indistinguishable from pagan art ends with the art of late antiquity disappearing into something to be regarded as distinctively Christian," and continues to evolve into the Middle Ages.[209]

The formal characteristics and even some motifs as outlined in Chapter III were essentially the same as pagan art, which is why scholars including Jensen argue that Early Christian art should not be studied as its own separate category.[210] By isolating Early Christian art, scholars are implying that religious communities in antiquity were exclusive. The first two centuries were a time of overlap and transition between pagan Roman and Christian iconography. The ancient Romans relied largely on syncretism—the blending of cultural practices, religious beliefs, and style—in order to peacefully absorb conquered foreign territories

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[206] Mary Charles-Murray, "The Emergence of Christian Art" in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 57.
[207] Charles-Murray, 57.
[208] Charles-Murray, 56-57.
[209] Charles-Murray, 57.
[210] Robin M. Jensen, "Compiling Narratives: The Visual Strategies of Early Christian Visual Art," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23 (2015), 2.

and keep their citizens content.[211] It is logical to assume that the early Christians would employ similar practices that fused their own beliefs with the pagan Roman traditions and artistic motifs and styles that they encountered daily.[212] For this reason, Christian art should not be studied separately from Greco-Roman art because it would require ignoring relationships and contextual information crucial to the understanding of the early Christians and their art.

As Elsner points out, "the most archetypal of Christian images…[show] striking continuities with the polytheistic cult of images."[213] As I discussed in Chapter III, the iconography of early Christian motifs can be divided into three broad categories: symbols, figures, and biblical scenes, all of which have direct pagan influences and continued to be standards of Christian art for hundreds of years. Typical symbols with pagan origins include doves, peacocks, grapevines, fish, boats, banquets, and more.[214] Figural motifs were a direct reference to pagan art with common examples including the orant, the Good Shepherd, and mythological figures especially Ulysses, Sol, Orpheus, and Hercules.[215] Biblical scenes also reused Greco-Roman artistic conventions but replaced the mythological and heroic figures with biblical ones. Early Christians reused architectural spaces and borrowed existing motifs and practices but applied them to Christian principles and narratives. The influence of paganism on the development of Early Christian art is well-documented, especially in funerary art.

Equally important, but significantly less documented, is the influence women had on early Christianity and art. Recent scholars including Christine Schenk have begun to focus their research on women in antiquity, emphasizing the role they played in the popularization and

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[211] Levine, 33.
[212] Levine, 33.
[213] Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 251.
[214] Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 17.
[215] Jensen, 35–45; Janet Huskinson, "Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 42 (1974), 85.

survival of Christianity at its beginning. Early Christianity before the development of the church offered women some freedoms and leadership opportunities. The women who participated were generally widows and wealthy women who wanted responsibility and purpose outside of the house and marriage.[216] As a result, women served as some of the earliest Christian leaders and officials, and even offered their homes as meeting spaces.[217] Evidence for women in leadership roles is found in funerary art and inscriptions which have been misinterpreted in the past, effectively erasing these women and their impact. Such women include Flavia Vitalia, Bitalia, Cerula, Bishop Q, Phoebe, and more, as outlined in Chapter IV.

Women also served as patrons and subjects of Early Christian art. Many wealthy women donated land for Christian catacombs and churches. They were the earliest benefactors of the church and its mission and are in large part responsible for the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman empire. There is significant documentation of women who led house-churches, made donations, and sponsored artworks. As I discussed in Chapter IV, women also appear as subjects in Early Christian art, but have often been misinterpreted or generalized, such as with the orant. In the past scholars have argued that the orant is a general symbol for piety rather than a representation of an individual. Funerary art also provides several examples of women depicted as church officials but have been overlooked despite women having an overwhelming number of portraits in catacombs when compared to men.[218] My goal was to bring attention to these "erased" women and the significant impact they had on Christianity and Christian art, which would not exist today without the contributions of these women.

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[216] Christine Schenk, *Crispina and her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 54–55.
[217] Joan M. Petersen, "House-Churches in Rome" *Vigiliae Christianae* 23 (1969), 264–265.; Schenk, 54–57;
[218] Nicola Denzey, *Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 81.

By calling attention to the two major influences of Greco-Roman art and women on the development of Early Christian art, we can reevaluate our understandings, misconceptions, and preconceived notions about Christianity, its rise to popularity and power, and the people who made that rise possible. The abundance of evidence, especially for women and their contributions, is shocking when considering how the church has attempted to disassociate itself from its pagan predecessors and continues to exclude women, the very two groups who shaped the foundation of the church. By acknowledging these hypocrisies and focusing scholarship on underrepresented voices, we contribute to the creation of a more complete and more accurate history of art and culture that allows for inclusivity (in both past and present), discussion, and truth.

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FIGURES

Figure 1: Sarcophagus of the Good Shepherd. Marble, second half of the 4th c. CE. Museo Pio-Cristiano, Vatican City.

Figure 2: Donna velatio. Fresco, 3rd c. CE. Cubiculum of the Velatio in the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, Italy.

Figure 3: The Good Shepherd. Fresco, 3rd c. CE. Catacomb of SS. Pietro and Marcellino, Rome, Italy.

Figure 4: Sarcophagus. Marble, ca. 270 CE. Church of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, Italy.

Figure 5: Christ as Sol Salutis. Mosaic, ca. 25-275 CE. Mausoleum of the Julii, Vatican City.

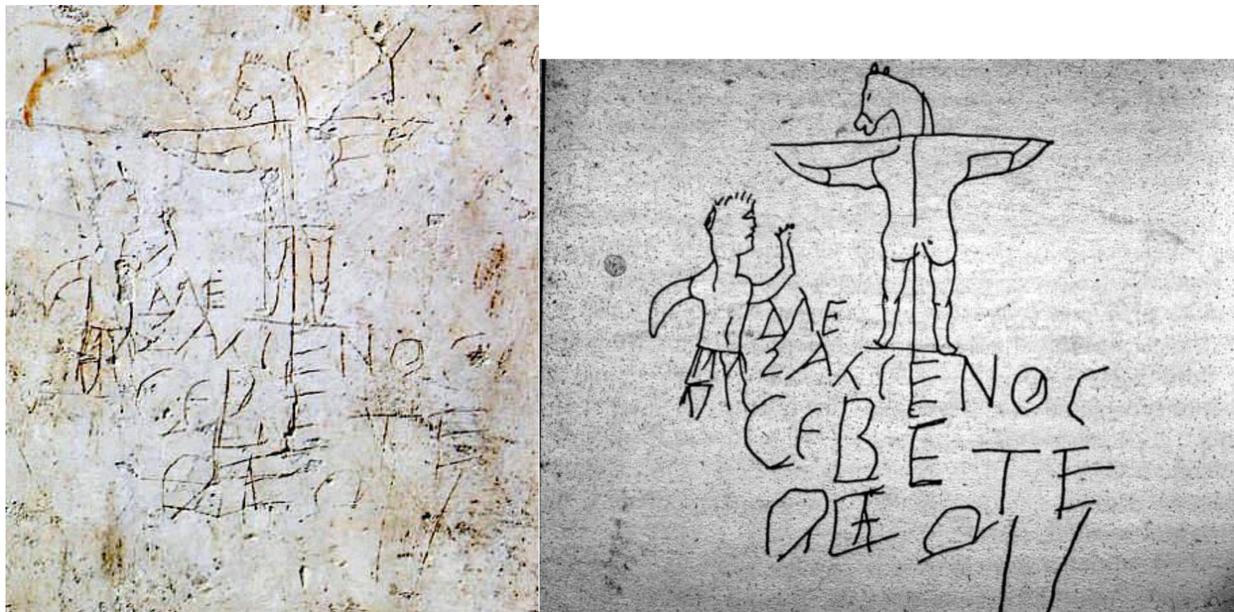

Figure 6: Graffito with a Man Worshipping a Donkey-Headed Man on the Cross. Plaster, 38 x 33 cm, first half of the 3rd c. CE. Museo Palatino, Rome, Italy.

Figure 7: Bitalia. Fresco, 3rd c. CE. Catacomb of San Gennaro, Naples, Italy.

Figure 8: Cerula. Fresco, 3rd c. CE. Catacomb of San Gennaro, Naples, Italy.

Figure 9: Crispina. Marble, 4th c. CE. Vatican Museums, Vatican City.